**COMMONWEAL**

**The Juvenile Justice Program**

***www.comjj.org***

**□** [***www.comjj.org***](http://www.comjj.org)

**March 22, 2019**

**San Francisco weighs closure of its juvenile detention center**

**By David Steinhart**

Under legislation proposed by three members of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors, the city’s juvenile detention center would shut down by December 2021, with arrested youth going instead to an array of community programs and services.

The push to close San Francisco’s 150 bed “juvenile hall” is driven by low occupancy rates and high operating cost. Proponents also question the value or need for juvenile detention in the first place. Supervisor Shamann Walton, a co-sponsor of the closure plan and former juvenile hall resident, says in a press release: “When we lock up youth, we are sending them the message that we’ve given up on them. That’s exactly what Juvenile Hall teaches them—how to walk around with your head down and your hands behind your back. All I learned in the hall was how to survive life in prison.”

Another co-sponsor, Supervisor Hillary Ronen, cites the cost to the city (“over 13 million dollars per year and more than$ $270,000 per child”) to lock kids up in a facility that is consistently three-fourths empty. In December 2018, San Francisco’s juvenile detention center held just 40 juveniles (27% of capacity) with many confined on misdemeanor charges or simply awaiting placement elsewhere. “We need to stop investing in an outdated institution that is expensive, ineffective and traumatic for children” Ronen said, instead using those funds for programs and services “to build healthy and stable lives”.

San Francisco’s struggle with empty detention space echoes a steep statewide decline in occupancy rates for local juvenile detention facilities. At the end of 2018, according to California Board of State and Community Corrections, California’s juvenile halls and probation camps had total rated capacity of 12,600 beds but had an ADP (average daily population) of just 3,800 (30% occupancy rate). The decline in detention is due mainly to a persistent decline in juvenile arrests. California arrests of juveniles for felony offenses have dropped by more than 75% over the last 20 years, according to data furnished by the state Department of Justice.

**Overbuilding juvenile detention space**

As it turns out, California badly overbuilt its local juvenile detention capacity in successive construction waves. A surge of juvenile facility construction in the 1990s added nearly 3,000 local confinement beds to the state’s then-robust 6,000 bed capacity. Another injection of state dollars pushed local youth detention capacity even higher following the “realignment” of the state youth corrections system in 2007. But these construction booms failed to anticipate California’s plummeting juvenile arrest rates. The result has been a plethora of empty beds with associated high unit costs to keep facilities open. According to an investigative report published in March 2019 in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, some large counties, like Alameda and Santa Clara, are facing unit costs hovering around $500,000 per year to confine a single juvenile.

San Francisco isn’t the only California county weighing abandonment of costly detention space. Los Angeles County has adopted an aggressive closure plan that would reduce its former array of 19 juvenile probation camps to just six remaining facilities designed to serve high-risk youth. Probation facilities in other counties, including camps in San Francisco and Sacramento, have closed due to low rates of utilization. Last year, the Chief Probation Officers of California (“CPOC”) asked the state legislature to spend $30 million on a statewide plan to “repurpose” empty juvenile detention space to other uses. That budget request was not granted, but it did highlight a vast detention space problem in search of a solution.

Closing a juvenile detention center, especially in a large urban county, does raise some sticky issues—like what happens to a youth apprehended for serious and violent conduct. Allen Nance, San Francisco’s Chief Juvenile Probation Officer, has questioned the closure plan by noting that some juveniles present a high public safety risk that would be “unwise to ignore”. State law currently requires secure detention for juveniles who are arrested for listed, violent offenses. The proponents of juvenile hall closure in San Francisco have deferred on the question what to do in these cases by including a plan for a working group to come up with a new model for handling youth needing detention as a matter of state law or public safety. San Francisco’s Mayor, London Breed, reacted to the supervisors’ proposal to close the juvenile hall by announcing the formation of her own panel of experts to examine closure issues and other options for juvenile justice reform in San Francisco.

**California’s progressive reform agenda**

The San Francisco proposal to terminate its detention center sits against a backdrop of progressive statewide juvenile justice reforms. In 2016, California voters ended the practice of prosecutorial “direct file” on juveniles in adult criminal courts. Last year, California lawmakers banned transfers to adult court for juveniles under the age of 16, while also eliminating the delinquency jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court for most children under age 12. California’s new Governor, Gavin Newsom, has pledged further reforms beginning with unplugging the state’s Division of Juvenile Justice from adult corrections and moving it to a more service-oriented operation under California’s Health and Human Services Agency. Progressive lawmakers are also launching new state-funded initiatives including a $37 million grant program that will support front-end youth diversion programs run by community-based agencies. From both the state and local perspectives, California’s juvenile justice system is in the midst of a transformation that prioritizes diversion and youth services over formal processing and incarceration. ◘